

Bystanders and Bullying: Why Don't People Move to Action?

Recent news stories about teenage fighting and the responsibility of bystanders raises many questions for us. How is it that otherwise good people—kids—can stand by to watch a fight without trying to stop it, and even egging it on? What is the appropriate response to these incidents from parents or school officials?

WHY?

Research suggests that people will act against their own consciences for a variety of reasons, including:

- Fear of being hurt, or of going against the current perceived social norm.

“If nobody else is acting, then why should I”

- Perception that it's not my problem or my responsibility.

“Someone else should act.”

- Belief that someone in authority—perhaps the bully or the perpetrator—is in a position of authority, and is somehow “right” in his or her actions.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Unfortunately, bystanders are living up to their potential: Standing by to do nothing. But the research also suggests that bystanders actually have the power to drastically reduce bullying, if they are taught HOW to intervene.

- Studies show that if a bystander discourages a bully, there is a 50% chance that the bully will stop. However, if kids don't know what to do, as many as 25% will actually encourage the bully.
- People are moved to action for two essential reasons:

Can I do it?

Will it be worth it?

Schools and parents can learn the basics of what's called “Bystander Empowerment”. It teaches kids and adolescents how to use a variety of techniques for intervention without putting themselves in danger. These techniques can be taught through role playing and discussions. Kids usually know what the “right” thing to do is, but don't always know how to do it in specific situations.

It is important for schools and parents to have clear rules and expectations about bullying and fighting. The recent incidents reported in the news create the opportunity for parents and schools to come together in a dialogue about personal and emotional safety.